

## Star Wars

### Wizard's RPG Stories

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#### Only a Master of Evil

By JD Wiker

In the Star Wars Roleplaying Game, bad guys generally fit into one of three categories: the rank-and-file villain (the average Imperial officer), the ultra-tough super-villain (such as Darth Vader or Darth Maul), or the plotting and scheming master villain (such as Darth Sidious or Count Dooku). Of these three types, only the latter two are likely to live long enough to be recurring villains. The super-villain survives because he's so tough that the heroes have no hope of taking him down until they're a lot closer to his level, and the master villain always lives to fight another day because he has a plan for getting out of every situation.

Rank-and-file villains and super-villains are easy to cook up, because they don't require much thought to stat out, fit them with a motivation or two, and turn them loose on the heroes. However, the master villain can be a real headache to plan encounters for, because it boils down to a battle of wits between the Gamemaster and the players, and the players are sometimes more resourceful than the GM bargained for! More than one master villain, meant to survive until the end of the campaign, has fallen victim to a lucky player attack roll or an unlucky saving throw. But consider: What if a GM could create a master villain that even the noblest of heroes didn't want to attack?

#### Villainy in the Making

I used to have a hard time portraying villains in my roleplaying sessions. Oh, sure, I could play the run-of-the-mill, rank-and-file bad guy like there was no tomorrow; all I ever really had to vary were the threats: "Drop your weapons/the code cylinder/the remote, or I kill this old woman/the senator/your friend!" Even the high-level juggernaut was a cakewalk. He'd slap the heroes around a bit and then leave them with a casual insult: "I don't have time for this foolishness. Come back when you actually know how to use those weapons!"

However, the subtle kinds of villains, the masterminds, were much harder. In one of my campaigns, for example, I had created one of the most vile, despicable, ruthless businessmen in the civilized world... and then made him the heroes' occasional benefactor. He went out of his way to facilitate, and sometimes bankroll, their business deals, showered them with gifts, invited them to his palatial estate for luxurious and expensive dinners, and generally made himself available whenever they needed him. The heroes always wondered when their "bill" would come due, but they never found out about this guy's secret life--the business rivals he had bankrupted and then sold into slavery (along with their entire families), the assassins he had hired, or the innocent people he had personally murdered in order to appease his own

depraved master. He presented them with an innocent facade, and they were all too happy not to look too hard beyond it. If he was a threat to them, they didn't want to know.

When I realized that the heroes were deliberately avoiding finding out the truth about their evil benefactor, it dawned on me that, if I wanted to have a recurring master villain in my campaign, all I had to do was make him such a nice guy that the players actually felt bad about voicing suspicions about him. To satisfy players who liked more physical confrontations, I could also have a powerful villain who would simply lurk in the campaign, appearing from time to time to threaten the heroes with bodily harm. Just because I had one type of villain didn't mean I couldn't have the other. After all, look at the combination of "thinker" and "doer" in Star Wars: the Emperor and Vader, Sidious and Maul, and Dooku and Jango Fett.

### Villainy in the Campaign

So, now that I've discussed the concept of the "villain hiding in plain sight" in its broadest terms, how about some specific examples to plug into your own Star Wars campaigns? And how about some general tactics for keeping them hidden?

#### The Evil Patron

One of the oldest and most easily spotted tricks in the Gamemaster's book is the "secretly evil patron." This is the individual or organization that the heroes work for, but that later proves to be the overall villain of the piece. Wouldn't Count Dooku make a great patron for a group of Star Wars heroes in the Rise of the Empire era? "The Confederacy of Independent Systems must defeat the Republic, for we have secret information that the Senate is under the control of the Sith." This kind of evil mastermind makes for an excellent recurring villain, because the GM has to do very little work to make sure he stays alive. The heroes won't act on any of their suspicions about their patron until the evidence before them is nigh-incontrovertible.

The drawback of an evil benefactor is that the players—not the heroes, but the players—may begin to suspect every benefactor you present, in every campaign that you run, in every system that you play, to have a secret agenda. Consequently, their characters won't trust anyone who claims to want to help them.

Keeping the Evil Patron Hidden In all probability, the heroes work for the villain and just don't realize how wicked he is. To keep stringing them along, he has to give them assignments that seem morally unambiguous but that serve his own purposes, either in the short term, or better yet, in the long term. Thus, the GM should avoid giving the heroes missions that involve investigation, and instead focus on combat-oriented missions. The heroes are less likely to learn they're fighting for the wrong side if they shoot first and ask questions later.

If the heroes question their orders, the evil patron should be prepared with corroborating data (falsified evidence, edited testimonies, and so forth). Even then, the patron should express surprise and disgust if the heroes learn that the evidence was faked, and perhaps even send the heroes to eliminate the "provocateur" who engineered the deception.

Finally, the evil patron should also have another agent working for him--someone even the heroes don't know about--to spy on the characters and monitor their trust in the patron, as well as to subtly lend aid when the heroes need it. Of course, the heroes should occasionally tangle with this mystery agent, who can be of the "super-villain" variety to ensure his staying power.

The evil patron should have a nice high Bluff skill modifier, and a good Sense Motive wouldn't hurt, either.

#### The Evil Advisor

How to make this concept work, then, is to turn the patron into an advisor--someone with influence in local (or even galactic) matters, but not someone to whom the heroes are required to report directly. For example, let's say that the heroes work for the Jedi Order during the Rise of the Empire era, and for advice, they go to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. By some strange coincidence of fate, it turns out that Palpatine is, in actuality, Darth Sidious himself! He could give them seemingly sound advice, but instead be manipulating them to his own ends, or, more safely, simply be gathering information on their plans to pass on to his operatives, the very opponents the heroes are soon to face!

Keeping the Evil Advisor Hidden The best part about the evil advisor is that he can repeatedly stress that he's "as much in the dark" as the heroes when it comes to knowing what's really going on. Thus, if he gives them bad advice, he can pretend to feel just terrible about leading them astray, and even go so far as to make amends. If the GM plays this master villain correctly, the heroes might actually come to beg for his advice, with the evil advisor feigning reluctance, "lest my counsel lead to more innocents being harmed."

The GM should plan out the evil advisor's agenda several moves in advance, so that the heroes never quite catch on to the consequences of his advice. For example, their mission to pacify a planet of Separatists could immediately result in the liberation of the loyalist faction there, but also later make a great excuse for the advisor to arrange for a military base to be built on the same site, thus ensuring that the planet's factories can easily be retooled to provide weapons for the Republic. Of course, since this takes place over the course of several missions, it's likely that the heroes never think to go back and check on the progress of the provisional government they left in charge.

#### The Outwardly Evil Opponent

Somewhat less common is the ally disguised as an enemy. Such a character may do things that the heroes find objectionable, but his motives may be purer than they seem. Consider Borsk Fey'lya, the Bothan diplomat who rose to become Chief of State of the New Republic. He seemed to have a personal grudge against the Jedi, but ultimately, he was just a single-minded politician out to champion his species and homeworld. This kind of opponent makes a great match for the evil benefactor. With someone so obviously threatening, the heroes rarely think to look closer to home for the real villain. In fact, a good evil benefactor cultivates an outwardly evil opponent to pin the heroes' troubles on.

The drawback of such a character is that the heroes may never find it in their hearts to trust him, no matter how often he helps them, and so GMs can find themselves constantly playing out this character "negotiating" with the heroes for their trust.

Keeping the Outwardly Evil Opponent Hidden This kind of master villain works so well because, in his own mind, he's not a villain at all. For that matter, his own people might consider him a great hero! There's actually very little reason to hide that fact, though the GM could hint at "mind control" or "secret executions" or whatever other propaganda it takes to get the heroes to really hate this opponent. Even if the heroes do discover that the outwardly evil opponent isn't such a bad guy after all, the differences between their ideologies and his should keep him from becoming an ally.

#### The Evil Dupe

Often the good can be deceived into performing evil, tricked by a mastermind who wants to remain behind the scenes as he plays his opponents against one another. No matter whether the dupe defeats the heroes or the heroes defeat the dupe, the bad guy has one less enemy to face. Anakin Skywalker, subtly manipulated by Palpatine, is a classic dupe. It just remains to be seen, in Episode III, how Palpatine's deception of the powerful young Jedi plays out. The best part about the dupe is that once the heroes realize that he isn't the real villain, they probably try to talk with him rather than fight, giving him a golden opportunity to land a few solid blows before it occurs to him to wonder why they aren't fighting back.

Unfortunately, the evil dupe is usually good for only a single adventure, because, by the end of it, he probably knows that he's been deceived and used. He might make a good recurring character, but his days of villainy are almost certainly over. Fortunately for the evil mastermind, there are more where that one came from, so even if the dupe can't be a recurring villain, the endless supply of dupes means that the GM doesn't need the dupe to return again and again.

Keeping the Evil Dupe Hidden In many ways, the evil dupe is the complement to the outwardly evil opponent. The dupe believes he's doing what's right, but he's not really a mastermind; he's more like the super-villain, though he needn't be that powerful. Still, since he's not likely to be around for long, it's not necessary to work too hard to keep his motives a secret from the heroes.

#### The Evil Pawn

Evil being evil, loyalty to one's minions is not a high priority for masterminds. The pawn does the master's bidding and may even consider himself an indispensable member of the "team," but the mastermind is ever aware that the pawn can be sacrificed, or even replaced, at any time. Darth Vader is most clearly the Emperor's pawn by the time of Return of the Jedi, when the Emperor makes it clear that Vader has outlived his usefulness, and that he'd prefer a younger, healthier apprentice.

The evil pawn has two great advantages. First, he can serve as an opponent who is initially far too tough for the heroes to tackle, making him a

great recurring villain. Second, the GM can eventually turn the evil pawn into the heroes' ally, so long as they convince him to switch sides. Of course, he might not survive his former master's wrath, but redemption and sacrifice are two of the great themes in heroic fiction!

Keeping the Evil Pawn Hidden Like the evil dupe, the evil pawn is probably a super-villain rather than a master villain, though even a master villain can still be a pawn to another, even more cunning overlord. The GM should keep hidden the details of what the master holds over the evil pawn, because that's the key to getting the pawn to change sides. Of course, since the pawn rarely stops attacking the heroes long enough for them to get in a little psychoanalysis, his secret's probably safe. Still, as with Darth Vader in the original Star Wars trilogy, the information can come out in little bits, so that the story has moved along a great deal before the heroes have a chance to act on all the facts at their disposal. Furthermore, the heroes still might have to get the evil pawn on the ropes before he listens to them--as Luke Skywalker did with Vader in the Emperor's throne room.

#### Villainy Is Everywhere

Even if your campaign is already in full swing, there's nothing stopping you from changing the villain roster a bit. Take that combat-oriented recurring villain you had planned for the rest of the campaign and turn him into a super-villain, a challenge the heroes can't surmount until much later in the campaign. Then pick someone the heroes have previously consulted with for advice, and turn him into your own "phantom menace." You don't even need to change the campaign history to say that he was evil all along; a Sith artifact suddenly falling into his hands can do the trick.

Better yet, while the advisor is still one of the good guys, have him ask the heroes to undertake a mission for him, and let them be the ones who bring back the artifact that turns him evil! Arrange for them to give it to him for safekeeping, and when they later ask what he did with it, you can always quote another great Lucasfilm movie: "It's being studied by top men."